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AUTHOR Fishbaugh, Mary Susan E.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The traditional conception of rural as homogeneously agricultural has become archaic. This paper reviews definitions of rural diversity related to rural special education and proposes a broad definition based upon culture of community and region. In the late 1970s, the National Rural Project identified "problems" in rural special education delivery--rural idiosyncrasies later described as "attributes" to be considered in developing strategies for service delivery. Rural communities were viewed as differing in terms of cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic factors. An offshoot of the project, the American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) publishes the Rural Special Education Quarterly (RSEQ) and holds a national conference annually. A perusal of RSEQ issues and ACRES conference presentations suggests that ACRES has lost sight of its early inclusive understanding of diversity based on rural community culture. Given the original ACRES perspective on rural diversity, continuing emphasis on the individuality of rural communities, and the impact of rural community culture on education, it is proposed that ACRES develop a policy statement on rural diversity based in regional diversity. Regional rural differences consider ethnic diversity but include economic, political, and community cultural diversity as well. In "The Nine Nations of North America," Joel Garreau describes a North America composed of culturally distinct "nations" such as Dixie and MexAmerica. The proposed ACRES policy on rural diversity could draw on this work. Contains 23 references. (SV)

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Mary Susan E. Fishbaugh
Montana State University-Billings
Terry R. Berkeley
Towson State University
Stephen D. Dempsey
Black Hills State University

RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION IN *THE NINE NATIONS OF NORTH AMERICA*: A POLICY PROPOSAL FOR THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

Prologue

Traditionally, "rural" has been synonymous with "farm." Rural schools met both the educational and social needs of farmers and their children. The rural school was the hub for community in isolated rural areas (Berkeley & Bull, 1995; DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1995). School calendars were even set to coincide with planting and harvesting crops. Teachers met the needs of any and all children in small inclusive settings. There were ample peer and cross-age tutoring. There was no "special" education different from the education afforded any student in the school. In the late 1970s, the National Rural Project was funded by the Federal government to study the effects of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, on rural special education service delivery. During the years of funding, the National Rural Project (NRP) reported voluminous statistics on every aspect of rural special education (Helge, 1981), produced the required thick governmental grant progress reports (Helge, 1979), and developed training modules for rural special education teacher preparation (Helge, 1986; NRP, 1980). Among the perspectives on rural special education that were explored was the issue of rural diversity.

Rural diversity was described in terms of geography, economy, isolation, population density, and community variables (Helge, 1983). Cultural diversity, defined in terms of ethnicity, was originally discussed as one facet of the differences between and among rural communities. Ethnic diversity was not the focus of rural diversity issues. Today, "rural" must be defined in relation to "metropolitan" and "nonmetropolitan;" at least 90% of today's rural population has little if anything to do with agriculture. The once-upon-a-time conception of rural as homogeneously agricultural that may never have been accurate has become archaic. The purpose of this paper is to review the ACRES definition of rural diversity over time, to explain the notion of diversity as it is presented in the *Nine Nations of North America*, and to propose a broad definition of rural diversity based more upon the culture of community and region than upon ethnicity. Recognition of rural diversity is a necessary precondition in provision of optimal educational opportunities for all rural students.

History

An early National Rural Project report identified "problems" in rural special education service delivery (Helge, 1979). The view of characteristics inherent to rural communities as "problems" was subsequently reversed and rural idiosyncrasies were described as "attributes" that could be used as resources in developing strategies for special education service delivery. The "problems" included the following:

- Cultural Factors

  Language barriers, cultural differences, resistance to change, and economic class differences
- Geographic and Climatic Factors

  Alternate transportation modes, marginal roads, mountainous areas, and long distances
- Socioeconomic Factors

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Low tax base, high unemployment, suspicion of external interference, family size, high levels of poverty, migrant employment, fishing and timber employment, mining employment, and farming employment

- Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Staff
- Child Find Activities

Attributes included strategies for the following:

- Overcoming Resistance to Change, Resolving Cultural and Language Differences

  Understanding the ripple effect, employing attitude change techniques, and using mandates
- Coping with Long Distance, Ameliorating Isolation

  Regional information and technical assistance systems, and effectively filling down-time
- Identifying and Using Hidden Resources to Overcome Scarcity

  Training personnel to fill multiple roles, using cost-efficient service delivery models, using parent and community resources, initiating a management information system, using high school students, and interfacing with university personnel
- Recruiting and Retaining Trained Professionals

  Inhibiting teacher burn-out, enhancing inservice incentives-accessibility-quality, and overcoming negative attitudes between teachers and support personnel
- Enhancing Child Find Resources.

A later publication (Helge, 1983) continued to describe the unique strengths and weaknesses of rural areas as multi-faceted. Rural communities were viewed as differing in terms of economics, stability, geography, isolation, and population density.

The American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES), an offshoot of the National Rural Project, continued following the project's demise. ACRES reorganized, and separated from the organization for Rural and Small Schools. The organization continues to publish the *Rural Special Education Quarterly* (*RSEQ*), and hosts a successful national conference annually. A perusal of ACRES attempts to address the issue of rural diversity demonstrates that as an organization, ACRES has lost sight of its early inclusive understanding of diversity based upon the concept of rural community culture.

Diversity in *RSEQ*. The *Rural Special Education Quarterly* has dedicated at least two issues to rural special education diversity. *Volume 8*, Number 1 (1986) was a topical issue on serving cross-cultural populations. Diversity was defined by ethnicity. The articles addressed serving Asian gifted and talented children, involving African American parents, effects of head injury on American Indians, training general educators of American Indians, and developing curricula for Chinese children with limited English proficiency. *Volume 11*, Number 2 (1992) was a topical issue on multicultural needs. As with the earlier journal issue, this one defined diversity in reference to ethnic culture. Occasionally, individual articles in *RSEQ* have addressed student diversity. De Leon and Cole (1994) wrote regarding service delivery to culturally and linguistically diverse rural students with disabilities. A recent issue of *RSEQ* provided both retrospective and prospective snapshots of rural special education (*Volume 14*, Number 2, 1995). Berkeley and Bull (1995) delve into the past, present, and possibilities in rural education. They consider the evolving view of rural from the past idyllic farm vision to the present cacophony of rural definitions, issues, and obstacles. They consider the essence of rural schools, educators, families, and community. Mallory (1995) extends their discussion to application of an ecocultural perspective for rural education. "Eco" refers to the larger political environment, while "cultural" refers to the immediate environment including familial implications. It is in this direction that the present policy proposal continues.

Diversity in ACRES Conference Presentations. A review of ACRES Conference Proceedings from 1991 through 1996 revealed the ethnically based perspective on rural diversity. The Savannah conference (1993) had one presentation that addressed multicultural rural gifted education. To their credit, the presenters viewed multiculturalism more broadly than in terms of minority cultures. They included socioeconomic factors, religion, and unique rural cultures. In Las Vegas (1995), ACRES sponsored an American Indian strand. Topics included barriers to university degrees, networking with Indian communities, field based rural special education teacher preparation, communicating with non-Indian service providers, and cultural immersion. In addition, there was a presentation addressing cultural diversity among rural West Virginia gifted students. Only two presentations addressed diversity at the Baltimore conference (1996). One defined "diverse" learners in terms of students with exceptional educational needs. The other was a case study addressing preparation of special educators for work with cultural and linguistic diversity. The annual ACRES conference has for the most part sponsored only one perspective of diversity, a perspective based on ethnic differences.

Concept of Rural Community. This paper is an attempt to define rural diversity broadly with reference to the regional cultures of rural communities. Such a definition returns to the original conception of rural diversity held by the National Rural Project. The definition synchronizes with past and present concepts of rural community. The definition does not ignore ethnic diversity, but understands it with reference to broader conceptualizations of differences within, between, and among rural communities. Basing an ACRES policy on such an inclusive definition of rural diversity will allow the organization to better meet the educational needs of rural special education students in preparation for adult involvement in their idiosycratic regional community cultures. Such a policy can directly impact the "rural brain drain" (IEL, 1995; Seal & Harman, 1995), and has implications for addressing chronic rural poverty (Hodgkinson, & Obarakpor, 1994; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995).

Originally, the National Rural Project defined rural diversity according to many different aspects of rurality. Authors who have addressed rural education issues from the early 1980s to the present have defined rural diversity similarly, based on differences in rural communities. Edington and Conrad (1981) defined issues in rural education as the federal role, reverse migration, rural school finance, community involvement, and academic achievement. They stressed that because rural people were not homogeneous and rural environments varied, the issues could only be addressed with consideration for considerable rural diversity.

The October, 1995 issue of Phi Delta Kappan was dedicated to rural education. The concept of rural community was emphasized (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995; Haas & Lambert, 1995; Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). The profile of an individual rural community impacts the purpose, quality, and outcome of education in that community. Educational reform initiatives are likewise molded by the rural community. The culture of a rural community was not written about in terms of ethnic culture, but in terms of rural versus urban "culture" (DeYoung & Lawrence, 1995). But cultural differences do not end there. Rural cultures differ regionally and economically, as well as ethnically. In fact, any effective reform efforts for the improvement of rural schools must take into account the following considerations (Seal, & Harmon, 1995):

- Rural schools are influenced by the economic and cultural outlooks of their communities
- Rural schools reflect the economic and social stratification of the community
- Rural schools value discipline and hard work
- Rural schools are the cultural and social centers of rural life
- Rural schools serve as a major link between the rural community and the world.

Given the original NRP/ACRES perspective on rural diversity, continuing emphasis on the individuality of rural communities, and the impact of rural community culture on education, we

propose developing an ACRES policy statement on rural diversity that has its basis in regional diversity. Regional rural differences consider ethnic diversity, but include economic, political, and community cultural diversity as well.

The Nine Nations of North America

In *The Nine Nations of North America* , Joel Garreau (1982) suggests that we reconsider the borders dividing the United States, Canada, and Mexico. He considers that the maze of state and provincial boundaries to be meaningless. Instead, Garreau describes a North America composed of the following nine nations:

- New England
- The Foundry
- Aberrations
- Dixie
- The Islands
- MexAmerica
- Ectopia.
- The Empty Quarter
- The Breadbasket
- Québec

Few of the boundaries of these nine nations match the political lines on current maps. Some are clearly divided topographically by mountains, deserts, or rivers. Others are separated by architecture, music, language, or the inhabitants' related occupations. In fact, each has a peculiar economy.

Each nation has its own capitol with a distinctive web of power and influence. A few of the nations are allies, but many are political and economic adversaries. Each commands emotional allegiance from its citizens. Some nations are close to being raw frontiers, while others have four centuries of history. Many have characteristic dialects and mannerisms. Several of the nations have their own acknowledged national poets. These nations look different, feel different, and sound different from each other. Each has its idiosyncratic perspective of the current universe and its individual future world plan.

The common "culture" of each nation supersedes any individual ethnic differences of the citizens. Considering diversity from the perspective of the nine nations has important educational implications for rural communities. Consideration of the culture in each of the nine nations of North America will promote appropriate education programming, prepare students for the economy in which they will have to compete, and facilitate transition of special education students from their rural school to an adult role in one of the nine nations.

ACRES Policy on Rural Diversity (Proposed)

The ACRES policy on rural diversity should be developed and accepted by the organization's membership. The policy should, however, include the following components:

- Policy Title
- Rationale
- Purpose
- Definition(s)
- Statement of Policy

To remain consistent with ACRES original inclusive understanding of rural diversity, to recognize the essential nature of community to ruralness, and to program optimally for rural special education students, the organization's policy on rural diversity should be based upon the *Nine Nations of North America*.

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